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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14'S DIVISION OF LABOR FOR WINNING
THE 2009 ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 780
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 770
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 766
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 747
[1](#)E. BEIRUT 733
[1](#)F. BEIRUT 724

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Following March 14's nomination of Fouad Siniora as prime minister in the next cabinet, March 14 Secretariat SYG Fares Suaid envisions a division of labor over the next 10 months to ensure its success in the 2009 parliamentary elections. PM Siniora reportedly told March 14 leaders that his role would be to look after the economic and security issues facing the country, including confronting Hizballah. In Suaid's view, the Secretariat's role should be to focus on overall political messaging, especially vis-a-vis Hizballah, leaving coalition-building to majority leader Saad Hariri and others. Suaid views Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's May 26 speech as a "gift to March 14" by making Hizballah an easy target for criticism. End summary.

OPPOSITION'S ACQUIESCENCE ON
SINIORA SIGNALS UPCOMING
BATTLES ON CABINET FORMATION

[1](#)2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor met with March 14 SYG Fares Suaid at his home in Rabieh on May [1](#)28. Suaid had participated in the May 27 meeting of March 14 leaders in which they announced their selection of Fouad Siniora for the premiership (Ref A). Suaid said that Saad's "inner core" of advisors (Ghattas Khoury, Nader Hariri, Hani Hammoud, Bassem Saba, Deputy Speaker Farid Makkari) had pushed hardest for Saad, arguing that Saad needed "fresh" blood in his entourage. Saad, after taking a severe beating in Beirut, is afraid of Hizballah and Sunni extremists and needs strong U.S. support, he added.

[1](#)3. (C) Michel Sleiman and March 8 also preferred Saad, Suaid said. The opposition did not view the Hariri family as fighters, he explained, recalling that even former PM Rafik Hariri had tried to have a good relationship with Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah. Suaid agreed that the opposition, by not openly contesting Siniora's nomination, was hoping to

extract more concessions on other portfolios. The opposition would accuse March 14 of not being willing to turn over a new leaf after Doha by nominating a candidate whom the majority knows is loathed by the opposition.

¶4. (C) Contrary to what as-Safir newspaper was reporting, Suaid said it was not true the Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi had tried to insert his name into the process, adding that Safadi was "mute" during the meeting.

SINIORA'S MESSAGE
TO MARCH 14

¶5. (C) Suaid said Siniora had stressed four key points in the May 27 meeting: 1) the necessity of cohabitating with President Sleiman; 2) the need for March 14 (vice the government) to prepare for the 2009 parliamentary elections; 3) the need for the government to focus instead on the difficult economic and security issue facing the country; and 4) the need to confront Hizballah.

¶6. (C) Siniora stressed the need for March 14 to develop a good relationship with the newly elected president to make it clear that the opposition (Hizballah in particular), and not Michel Sleiman, was the enemy. Suaid labeled Sleiman a "smart guy whom we can work with, but we need to get him on our side." There is a new player on the scene, he said, referring to the new President, and we need to work with him.

Predicting that Sleiman's first overseas trip would be to Qatar and Syria, followed by Washington and Paris, Suaid also

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said March 14 needed to get the Qataris on board.

¶7. (C) Siniora made it clear in his remarks that he would grant no gifts to March 14 in terms of governmental actions that would help lead to a March 14 victory in 2009. His message to the coalition was that it was up to them to undertake the necessary measures to win the election, and they should not rely on him. "I can't do March 14's job," he reportedly said. Siniora told March 14 leaders that his role as prime minister would be to address Lebanon's economic and security situations, noting that facing a "very insecure year." Siniora was, in Suaid's assessment, determined to confront Hizballah.

SECRETARIAT'S NEXT STEPS:
POLITICAL MESSAGING TO
COUNTER HIZBALLAH

¶8. (C) Suaid said Siniora also expressed a desire to develop a better relationship with the March 14 Secretariat, of which he reportedly spoke highly, citing good coordination over the past several months. Siniora is a fighter, Suaid said, and is determined to have a better relationship with Saad via the Secretariat. However, Saad currently was more focused on cabinet formation than coalition-building.

¶9. (C) Noting the "election fever" that was taking over the country, especially in Christian areas, Suaid said that if the Secretariat's role was to prepare the coalition for the 2009 elections by reconciling the competing interests of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, he did not want to be the Secretary General. In the March 14 meeting, Siniora had advocated running in the elections as a "coalition," which Suaid believed would be difficult, given interparty disagreements, but that party leaders knew this was necessary to win.

¶10. (C) According to Suaid, therefore, the Secretariat's role should be to develop a unified political message rather than establishing the "technical conditions" of coalition politics. The message should focus on Hizballah's arms, he elaborated, by emphasizing the sovereignty of the state and

its monopoly on the use of force. Hizballah would try to counter this by arguing that its militia was not a purely Shia militia, but one that embodied wide confessional membership, Suaid said, referring to an al-Manar (Hizballah's TV station) clip showing a multi-confessional militia training camp that is supporting Hizballah. Hizballah will argue that it is not only the Shia who have arms, but also other opposition members such as Druze Wiam Wihab, the Syrian opposition parties, and Aoun's bloc.

¶11. (C) Suaid confirmed that the state-building and other workshops launched after the March 14 Biel convention were continuing. Furthermore, the Secretariat continued its outreach to civil society and now had over 700 signatories on the petition for civil peaceful resistance and Hizballah disarmament (Ref F). However, the Secretariat needed more funding, which he hoped Saad would provide, and had not yet opened its new headquarters in Ashrafieh.

NASRALLAH'S SPEECH:
A GIFT TO MARCH 14

¶12. (C) Suaid called Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's May 26 speech (Ref B) a "gift to March 14." In 48 hours, he explained, we have seen two contrasting pictures. The first was the election of Michel Sleiman, supported by the entire Arab and international community, and his speech stressing the importance of the Taif Agreement and UNSC resolutions. (Suaid credited Sleiman's brother, Antoine, governor of the Bekaa and acting governor of Mount Lebanon, and Philippe Abi Akl, an independent journalist from Sleiman's hometown region of Jbeil with helping Sleiman with the speech.) The second was Nasrallah's "Che Guevara"-style speech talking about force. Hizballah exemplifies the "anti-state," Suaid said, adding that even those who are not pro-March 14 were not happy with the speech.

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¶13. (C) The Arab part of Nasrallah's speech was the most significant, Suaid continued, opposing two approaches: Hizballah's victory in Lebanon's 2000 "liberation" from and 2006 "defense" against Israel, proving that Hizballah's military strategy was the only way to get results, as opposed to the ongoing negotiations between Arab regimes and the U.S. and Israel. Now Syria is negotiating with Israel, and the U.S. is talking with Iran about Iraq, so Hizballah is sending a message to Damascus and Tehran that they need to take into account Hizballah, Suaid said.

¶14. (C) "Is Hizballah alone? Afraid?" Suaid asked aloud, answering, "I don't know." But after UNSCR 1701 Hizballah could no longer use its arms south of the Litani River, and after the Doha agreement it could not use them inside Lebanon. Nasrallah was therefore trying to stress the need for cohabitation between the state of President Michel Sleiman (according to Taif) and Hizballah's "wilayat al-faqih," with the former responsible for governance and economic issues, and Hizballah responsible for Lebanon's political and security welfare. This is how Hizballah dealt with former PM Rafiq Hariri, Suaid said, and this is how they want to deal with the next Siniora government. The unspoken message to Saad is that if you do not accept this arrangement, we will kill you.

¶15. (C) The Secretariat's goal, therefore, would be to paint a clear picture of these two opposing visions (the Lebanese state versus Hizballah's "anti-state" state) to President Sleiman, rather than push him into open confrontation with Hizballah. Asked what the majority's strategy would be to ensure that the new cabinet's inaugural statement to parliament contained strong language on Hizballah's arms, Suaid said March 14 leaders had discussed this at the meeting the night before, and all agreed it should be based on President Sleiman's acceptance speech. However, he

acknowledged that negotiating the statement would be difficult. Siniora's references to Shebaa Farms at Doha (which he termed a "charm operation" vis-a-vis Hizballah) were especially unhelpful, he said, because it only gives Hizballah more credibility. After the release of Lebanese prisoners from Syria, Hizballah would have no more "alibi" for its weapons were it not for Shebaa, he explained.

¶16. (C) Hizballah is the "Iranian instrument in Lebanon," Suaid concluded; the only real tool against Hizballah is pressure on Iran. Siniora's statement that Shebaa remains under Israeli occupation gives Hizballah a justification for including a reference to its right to bear arms in the ministerial statement. Suaid agreed that the majority would have difficulties in striking a balance between stressing Lebanon's adherence to UNSCRs 1559 and 1701, and not endorsing Hizballah's weapons.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) By all accounts March 14 has an uphill battle ahead, not only in terms of cabinet formation and agreement on the cabinet's first official address to parliament, but also in consolidating its political base over the next 10 months. The division of labor outlined by PM Siniora makes sense; it allows him to make (and eventually be the scapegoat for) the tough economic decisions necessary to put the GOL's fiscal house in order and qualify for additional Paris III assistance, as well as to continue his role as "bad cop" in confronting Hizballah. Saad is now free to focus on what he needs to focus on, building up March 14's constituency base and building better relations within the coalition. The March 14 Secretariat, as Suaid rightly asserts, can then deal on the bigger picture of coalition messaging, although we would still like to see its efforts focused more on what March 14 represents (in terms of state-building, Shia outreach, etc.) rather than what it opposes. End comment.

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